

TALKING TO STRANGERS: CRAFT INTERVIEWS THAT WILL GET EVEN THE HATERS TO TALK

EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM CONFERENCE

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See Deannelson.net for interviews with writers such as Ray Bradbury, Joyce Carol Oates, Michael Eric Dyson, Billy Collins, George Plimpton, Jeannette Walls, Nikki Giovanni, Amy Tan, Anne Lamott, Mary Karr, Bill McKibben, Chris Hedges, Rick Reilly, Siddhartha Mukherjee and many more. Next year's guests are Jane Smiley, Krista Tippett, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and others (Feb. 19-23, 2018).

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pointloma.edu/writers (website for Writer's Symposium By The Sea)

See story in July/August edition of Quill Magazine, "No Danger With Strangers"

Watch for Dean's new book on interviewing, "Talk to Me," with HarperCollins, 2019 release

WHY INTERVIEWS MATTER

- In addition to facts and data, we need the human voice, the unique perspective
- Whether our sources are shy or outgoing, or whether WE are shy or outgoing, we need to know how to talk to people.

- Human beings are the lifeblood of our stories.

WHO DO YOU WANT TO TALK TO, AND WHY?

- Experts, for the “official” account
- Witnesses, for different versions
- Stakeholders. Who is affected most? Those are your most important sources
- Establish a clear purpose for each kind of source

GETTING THEM TO TALK TO YOU

- They have to know why they should. You have to make the case
- They are busy. Reporters are always an intrusion.
- They had a bad experience with a reporter (misquoted, quote taken out of context), lack of trust (are we enemies of the people?). You must get past that so they can trust you (“But you’ve never talked to ME, have you?”)
- Most people will cooperate
- Helpful phrases: “I need your help on this,” “This story needs your unique perspective,” “I’m just getting started in journalism,” “I’m a journalism student,” “I’m writing a story about...”
- Flattery, guilt, and “We are doing the story with or without you. It would be more complete with you.” Use that last sentence as a last resort.

PREPARATION IS EVERYTHING

- Going into an interview cold will result in a cold interview
- In the age of the internet, you have no excuse to be unprepared
- Know as many answers in advance as you can. You’re looking for perspective more than information
- Hours of work ahead of time will make the conversation easier. Your source will trust you, and will be more reluctant to spin you.

PLAN YOUR QUESTIONS

- Or at least some of them. At least know the topic areas.
- If you’re just getting started in journalism, write the questions out, but don’t get too attached to them.
- Be prepared to improvise

- Put them in order. You don't start with the hard stuff. Start easy, increase the difficulty, and return to easy.

PLAN THE VENUE

- Think through where to conduct the interview. Each location has its strengths and weaknesses. Office? Home? Coffee Shop? Car? Place from the source's past?

LOOK THE PART

- If you want to be taken seriously, look professional. Not a slob, but also not from an escort service. Look like YOU are taking this seriously.
- Spit out your gum.

GO TO THE BATHROOM BEFORE YOU ARRIVE

- I know what I'm talking about here.

RECORD THE INTERVIEW? TAKE NOTES? TRUST YOUR PHONE?

- It depends.

ASK AND LISTEN

- Build rapport (briefly. Don't overdo it)
- Ask open-ended questions (Why and How questions are better than What, When or Where)
- Follow up, challenge, ask for clarification ("Really?" "What do you mean?" "Can you repeat that?")
- Take your time in note-taking. They want you to get this right, too.
- Develop a kind of shorthand.
- It's a conversation, not an inquisition
- Be okay with silence

CONTROL THE INTERVIEW

- It may take some doing, but the interview must be YOURS, not your source's.

ASK THE HARD QUESTION

- Your source is expecting it.
- Your readers and viewers are expecting it.
- Just don't start with it.

THREE QUESTIONS AT THE END OF EACH INTERVIEW

- How do you spell your name? (ask this EVERY time. Misspelling a person's name is unforgivable)
- Is there anything I should have asked that I didn't?
- May I contact you if I have other questions or need clarifications?

TYPE UP NOTES IMMEDIATELY

KNOW THESE TERMS: BACKGROUND, NOT FOR ATTRIBUTION, AND OFF THE RECORD. THEY MEAN DIFFERENT THINGS. THEY MUST BE ESTABLISHED BEFORE THE INTERVIEW BEGINS, NOT AFTER.

ADVICE: Watch, analyze and listen to interviews (Krista Tippett, Terry Gross, Charlie Rose, Marc Maron, Megyn Kelly). WHY was it awkward or awesome? Practice on your friends. Watch Almost Famous, End of the Tour, Frost/Nixon, and look at the interviewers' technique.